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SUBJECT: European Imams Meet in Vienna April 7-9

THIS MESSAGE IS SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED.

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Some 130 European Islamic leaders and Islam experts from more than 40 countries attended an April 7-9 conference of European imams in Vienna. The agenda focused on integration of Muslims into European societies, education, politics, women's rights, and the Mohammed cartoon debate earlier this year. Chancellor Schuessel noted that Austria's partnership model for diverse religious groups could be "an export article." Critics attacked the conference as a "showcase," however, saying it did not address real problems. A spokesman of the Shiite centers and mosques in Europe also complained that Shiite imams had not been "seriously invited." End Summary.

The Conference

¶2. (U) On April 7-9, Vienna was the venue for a conference of approximately 130 European Islamic leaders and Islam experts from more than 40 countries. Chancellor Wolfgang Schuessel, Parliamentary President Andreas Khol, Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik, and EU Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner attended the opening. DCM represented Embassy Vienna. The Austrian Islamic Community (IGG), in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the City of Vienna, and the European Islamic Conference, organized and hosted the conference. The meeting was a follow-up to the 2003 Graz conference of European imams.

Integration

¶3. (U) Participants said learning the host country's language and culture was essential, and urged Europe's Muslims and their religious leaders to take part in all aspects of society. IGG representatives and GOA officials stressed the need to foster integration by participation, especially by imams, in the host societies. The imams emphasized the need for dialogue and cooperation to achieve better understanding between cultures and religions. They called upon themselves to play stronger roles in helping their communities integrate into society. British Muslim representatives emphasized the need for training of imams, including a course on the political and legal system of the country in which they were teaching.

Euro-Islam

¶4. (U) A Vienna Islamic Religious Pedagogic Academy professor underscored that European Islam is "authentic," but can be distinguished from the Islam of the Muslim immigrants' home countries. For this purpose, he said, top Islamic experts should undertake a new exegesis of Islamic norms.

Cartoon Debate

¶5. (U) Regarding the recent Mohammed cartoon controversy, EU Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner underlined the importance of both freedom of religion and freedom of opinion. Ferrero-Waldner noted that the reaction to the Danish cartoons was the result of a series of misunderstandings. This theme also figured in the final statement the conference adopted. Many imams denounced the violent protests, as well as the media's focus on violence in Islam. Some conference participants called for an EU law banning acts offending religious feelings.

¶6. (SBU) COMMENT: Critics of the conference, among them an Austrian Muslim group outside the IGG, attacked the "showcase" character of the conference, saying the conference did not address real problems. Shiites, who constitute at least 30 percent of European Muslims, said they felt left out. A spokesman of the Shiite centers and mosques in Europe claimed that organizers had not "seriously invited" Shiite imams.

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